On March 25, 2000, Chen Shui-bian chose a special engagement for his first public appearance as Taiwan's president-elect, speaking at the Taiwan Major League’s opening game. Before the contest between the Taizhong Robots and the Gaoxiong-Pingdong Thunder Gods began, the capacity crowd heard the president-elect describe baseball as a “symbol of the Taiwanese spirit” in announcing that he would name 2001 “Taiwan Baseball Year” and consider officially designating baseball as Taiwan’s national sport. In his customary self-deprecating fashion, Chen confessed to a childhood fascination with baseball and joked that he only decided to be president after he realized he was not athletic enough to succeed in baseball.

President Chen’s attention to the game marks only the latest chapter in the history of Taiwanese baseball, a game that has become much more than just a sport. It is a colonial legacy that was planted and sunk deep roots during the fifty-year Japanese occupation of the island from 1895 to 1945. The professional version of the game in Taiwan is a reminder of the profound influence of transnational capitalism on Taiwan.

Taiwan’s complicated history has given rise to the need to present and understand Taiwan as part of the world community in its own right, not as part of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Much of contemporary Taiwanese culture, thus, emphasizes both the global and the local, and the blending of the two. Professional baseball in Taiwan is a perfect example of this self-conscious, ideological combination of the cosmopolitan and the provincial,
the international and the Taiwanese. The history of professional baseball in Taiwan, in many ways, is nothing more or less than the history of the effort to create a “baseball culture” that could speak to both of these striking and complementary aspects of Taiwanese life.

**Baseball in the Japanese Colonial Era**

Baseball in Taiwan, introduced by the Japanese colonial regime, has never thoroughly shed its Japanese heritage. From the name of the game, still called by many in Taiwanese yagyu (from the Japanese yakyū, and not the Mandarin bangqiu), to the Taiwanese-Japanese-English playground calls of “stu-rii-ku” and “out-tow,” baseball’s Japanese “origins” are still an important part of Taiwanese heritage. The sport, which was well developed in Japanese schools by the 1890s, was imported to the colony of Taiwan around 1897, just two years after its incorporation into the Japanese Empire. Initially played by colonial bureaucrats, bankers, and their sons in Taihoku (Taipei), baseball spread to southern Taiwan by 1910. In 1915 the colonial government formed the Taiwan Baseball Federation made up of fifteen (all-Japanese) school teams playing the quickly growing sport.

It was not long before Taiwanese youth joined in this new fun. In the early 1910s, Taiwan governor-general Sakuma Samata encouraged the development of baseball among Taiwanese youth. As he explained it, this was his humble way of repaying the local Taiwanese deity Mazu, who had appeared to his ailing wife in a dream and miraculously cured her. In 1921 Hualian native Lin Guixing formed a team of boys of the Ami aborigine tribe. They became known as the Nôkô Baseball Team, named for a nearby mountain, and achieved great fame when they traveled to Japan in the summer of 1925 and won four of nine games against Japanese school teams.

The most famous of all Taiwanese baseball traditions was that born at the Jiayi Agriculture and Forestry Institute (abbreviated Kanô) in the late 1920s. Under the guidance of Manager Kondô Hyôtarô, a former standout player who had toured the United States with his high school team, Kanô dominated Taiwan baseball in the decade before the Pacific War. What made the Kanô team special was its tri-ethnic composition; in 1931 its starting nine was made up of two Han Taiwanese, four
Taiwan aborigines, and three Japanese players. Kanô won the Taiwan championship, earning the right to play in the hallowed Kôshien High School Baseball Tournament, held near Osaka, five times between 1931 and 1936. The best of these, the 1931 squad, was the first team ever to qualify for Kôshien with Taiwanese (aborigine or Han) players on its roster.¹ Kanô placed second in the twenty-three-team tournament that year, their skills and intensity winning the hearts of the Japanese public, and remaining a popular nostalgic symbol even today in Japan. This team of Han, Aboriginal, and Japanese players “proved” to nationally minded Japanese the colonial myth of “assimilation” (dôka)—that both Han and aborigine Taiwanese were willing and able to take part alongside Japanese in the cultural rituals of the Japanese state. Of course, the irony is that the six Taiwanese players on the starting roster probably also saw their victories as a statement of Taiwanese (Han or aborigine) will and skill that could no longer be dismissed by the Japanese colonizing power.

The southern town of Jiayi cemented its reputation as the baseball capital of Taiwan when several of its sons went on to star in baseball in Japan. The greatest of these was Wu Bo, who starred on Kanô’s 1935 and 1936 championship teams, signed with the proud Tokyo Giants in 1937, and played for the Giants for seven years. In 1943, under the nationalistic pressures of wartime, Wu took the Japanese name Kure Masayuki. However, the next year he reminded the Japanese baseball community of his ethnic Chinese identity when he refused to travel to Manchuria with the Giants to rouse Japanese troops stationed there. Wu left the Giants outright, but went on to play for thirteen more years with the Hanshin Tigers and Mainichi Orions, and in 1995 he became the first Taiwanese player selected to the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame.

Taiwan did not just produce an elite class of standout baseball players. The sport became popular at all levels, making baseball as dominant a sport in the colony as it was in the home islands of Japan. Peng Ming-min would later trade his baseball mitt for the pen, enduring much sacrifice as he led the struggle for Taiwanese self-determination and independence during the Chinese Nationalist era. But as a boy in Gaoxiong in the 1930s, young Peng was a typical Taiwanese schoolboy obsessed with baseball. In a conversation with me in 1999, Peng fondly
Three members of the 1931 Kanô (Tainan District Jiayi Agriculture and Forestry Institute) baseball team. Kanô placed second in the empire-wide Kōshien tournament and became famous for its triracial composition of Han, aborigine, and Japanese players. (Photo courtesy of Andrew Morris.)

I remembered huddling around the radio to listen to broadcasts of the Japanese high school championships at Kōshien every spring. In his memoir, A Taste of Freedom, Peng recalls,

I was an ardent baseball fan. When Babe Ruth visited Japan I boldly wrote a letter to him and in return received his autograph, which became my treasure. . . . [I] reserved my greatest enthusiasm for baseball. Our school masters took baseball very
seriously, treating it almost as if it were a military training program. Although I was a poor batter, I was an excellent fielder, and played on our team when it won a citywide championship. Needless to say, my Babe Ruth autograph gave me great prestige among my classmates.²

The enthusiasm of millions of young people like Peng, who played and paid feverish attention to this Japanese institution, is what made baseball Taiwan’s “national game” some seventy years before President Chen’s remarks in 2000.

This Taiwanese excellence in baseball, the sport of the colonizing metropolis, reflects an important aspect of the experience of almost any colonized people. In Taiwan baseball was one way in which the colonized population sought to negotiate their relationship with the Japanese colonizing power on terms that the Japanese had to accept. Japanese exclusion of Taiwanese baseball teams or players would have given the lie to Japan's entire colonial enterprise.

Participation in Japan’s “national game” allowed Taiwanese people to prove and live their acculturation into the colonial order at the very moment that Taiwanese baseball successes worked to subvert it. Taiwanese subjects, both ethnic Chinese and aborigine, could use baseball skills and customs taught by the Japanese to appeal for equal treatment within the national framework that baseball represented in so many ways. The Taiwanese baseball community, through its many triumphs, was able to use this arena to offer the final proof, in a “national” language that the Japanese had to understand, that the colonial enterprise was bound to fail.

Baseball in Guomindang Taiwan, 1945–1980s

When the Guomindang (Chinese Nationalist Party), or GMD, took the reins of Taiwan’s government in late 1945, the government enforced policies of “de-Taiwanization,” officially degrading distinctively Taiwanese cultures or customs in order to cut the colonial ties to Japan. At the same time, however, the GMD also realized what a valuable exception baseball could be to the erasing of all colonial remnants. The party had promoted physical culture in planning the construction of a strong and healthy Chinese populace and state on the mainland for two decades.
Official endorsement of baseball soon became one method of officially “Sinicizing” a cultural realm that still represented a Pandora’s box of colonial thinking and customs. Baseball was included at the First Taiwan Provincial Games, held in October 1946 at Taiwan National University; twenty counties, cities, colleges, and government organizations sent baseball teams to this meet overseen by Chiang Kai-shek.

A baseball tournament was held in Taiwan in August 1947, even as government “anticommunist” forces continued their massacres, begun in March, of thousands of Taiwanese elites who were seen as a threat to Chiang’s regime. It is telling that the baseball world was not able to escape this horror. Lin Guixing, coach of the great Hualian Nôkô teams of the 1920s, was killed on August 1, 1947, during the violent and sustained aftermath of what was called the “February 28 Incident.” Fudan University and Shanghai Pandas teams also came to play against teams from Taipei, Taizhong, Taiwan Power, Taiwan Sugar, and Taiwan Charcoal, as if all was well that bloody summer. In 1949 a Taiwan Province Baseball Committee was formed, organizing annual provincial baseball tournaments at all levels of play.

What is interesting about the Guomindang efforts to promote baseball in Taiwan in the immediate postwar period is that Taiwan was the only region of the Republic of China (ROC) with any baseball tradition whatsoever; they could hardly promote baseball as a “Chinese” custom. Thus, their work to hijack the game’s unique popularity in Taiwan for their own uses still had to be in explicitly Taiwanese terms. Baseball remained an arena where Taiwanese people could successfully, and without any fear of reprisal, challenge the Guomindang’s policies of “de-Taiwanization” and claims to represent a true Chinese culture.

Baseball, then, is also central to the story of Taiwan’s rapid and traumatic transition from wartime to decolonization to a new oppression delivered in the rhetoric of “retrocession” to Chinese rule. Original support for Chinese rule in Taiwan was dashed violently and unmercifully by the actions of tens of thousands of carpetbagging Guomindang troops, bureaucrats, and hangers-on. Relieved and enthusiastic searching for a “Chinese” Taiwan, among Taiwanese, thus quickly gave way to a yearning for cultural artifacts from the good old colonial days.

Yet the vagaries of decolonization and retrocession do not provide
the full extent of this history. The Taiwanese people now had to contend with the reality of an invigorated American cold war imperialism in Taiwan and Asia as a whole. Taiwan’s baseball history offers a look at this process as well. In 1951 the first All-Taiwan baseball team was organized for a series of games against Filipino teams in Manila. The Manila sporting public fell in love with the All-Taiwanese, especially the astounding home run hitting of Hong Taishan. But the young team from Taiwan made an even deeper impression when team members “volunteered” to give blood to American soldiers recuperating in Manila hospitals from casualties sustained in the Korean War. This episode, though anecdotal, provides a profound metaphor to describe life in small Asian nations during the depths of the cold war. In the end, the greatest triumphs that could be won were in activities (like baseball) that were defined and approved by the United States, in locales dependent on and exposed to American beneficence and greed, and in ways that figuratively sucked life from these locales as they were integrated into America’s new postwar empire.

This incredible tightrope-walk between Japanese colonialist legacies and Guomindang-U.S. hegemony in Taiwan continued into, and was in many ways exemplified by, the international success of Taiwanese Little League baseball teams beginning in the late 1960s. In a tremendous run perhaps unmatched in the history of international sport, Taiwanese teams won ten Little League World Series titles between 1969 and 1981, and sixteen in the twenty-seven-year period from 1969 to 1995. This success brought desperately needed attention to Taiwan on the world stage and allowed the playing-out of a complicated jumble of national and racial tensions in Taiwan.

Taiwan’s Little League success began in August 1968, with two great victories by the Maple Leaf (Hongye) Elementary School team over a visiting team from Wakayama, Japan. The Hongye Village team, made up of Bunun aborigine youth representing their tiny Taidong County school of just one hundred students, earned the right to play Wakayama after winning the island-wide Students’ Cup tournament held in Taipei. They became superstars after their victories over Wakayama at the Taipei Municipal Stadium. The 20,000 fans who managed to get tickets for these historic games were joined by an island-wide television audi-
ence treated to more than thirteen hours of Taiwan Television broadcasts on the first game alone. The overall significance in Taiwan of the Maple Leaf boys’ success is hard to measure. Virtually all of Taiwanese society was energized in a way that has few parallels in American history; the Olympic triumphs of Jesse Owens and the 1980 hockey team are perhaps the closest examples. To this day the 1968 Maple Leaf victories against Wakayama are cited as a defining moment in the history of Taiwanese nationalism.

The next year, 1969, was Taiwan’s first foray into the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The youth of Taiwan spared no time in making this tournament an almost yearly blowout of any and all challengers. The Taizhong Golden Dragons, Taiwan’s 1969 champions, swept opponents from Ontario, Ohio, and California to take the world title. An impressed, if politically incorrect, Sporting News described the skill and infectious enthusiasm of “the Orientals”:

Thousands of gong-clanging, cheering fans in the stands at Williamsport adopted the Chinese as their favorite team.

[Chen Zhiyuan] captured the fans’ imagination when, after every out, he’d turn around and shout to his fielders, raising the ball above his head. In return they yell in Chinese the American equivalent of, “Go men!”

The players’ confidence was also boosted by the presence at their games of thousands of delirious Taiwanese and Chinese flag-waving fans who would make these yearly baseball pilgrimages to Williamsport for decades to come.

Fans at home in Taiwan were even more jubilant, glued to their radios into the wee hours of that humid summer night. One radio DJ remembered thirty years later how “the Taipei night nearly boiled over. When the game finished at 3 a.m., the streets of the city erupted with the constant banging of firecrackers, as ordinary citizens opened their windows and yelled out to the night sky, ‘Long live the Republic of China!’” At a time when Taiwan’s standing in the international community was becoming less and less stable this, like the Maple Leaf triumphs the year before, was a satisfying victory indeed.

Yet this championship, unfortunately, was plagued by irregularities. It was common knowledge in Taiwan that the 1969 world champions,
technically a school team from Taizhong in central Taiwan, had actually been recruited as a national All-Star team, a fact that clearly violated the Williamsport charter. Only two of the team’s fourteen players were from Taizhong, while nine of the starting players were from Jiayi and Tainan in the south of the island.6

Yet these geographical technicalities mattered little to the Taiwanese public at the time. In 1971, when the Tainan Giants won the Williamsport championship, some ten million people in Taiwan—two-thirds of the island’s population—watched the game on television, from 2:00 to 5:00 a.m. Baseball stardom became an almost universal aspiration among the boys and young men of Taiwan. Li Kunzhe, who starred professionally for the China Trust Whales in the late 1990s, remembers,

I grew up watching baseball. . . . I remember the days when everyone would wake up in the middle of the night to watch our national teams perform in the international competitions. They were national heroes. We all wanted to represent our country and be a hero.7

These triumphs were especially thrilling for Taiwanese people, but the humbled Americans were reduced to booing the Taiwanese youngsters (when the Tainan Giants won again in 1973, on their third consecutive no-hitter) and eventually even banning all foreign teams for a year in 1975 in order to guarantee an American “winner.”

Success in this Taiwanese (and not mainland Chinese) sport of baseball also invigorated dissidents and critics of the Chiang Kai-shek regime, who were thirsting for tangible measures of uniquely Taiwanese accomplishment. Williamsport soon became a “new battlefield” for Taiwanese dissidents and independence activists. In 1969 frenzied Taiwanese fans shouted upon the Golden Dragons’ victory, “The players are all Taiwanese! Taiwan has stood up!” Taiwanese supporters soon raised the stakes in this implicit protest against the Guomindang government. In 1971, as the Tainan Giants swept to a world championship, Taiwanese independence activists at Williamsport hired an airplane to fly over the stadium towing a bilingual banner reading, “Long Live Taiwan Independence, Go Go Taiwan.” The Taiwan teams’ games attracted fans from all points of the political spectrum, so each Taiwan independence flag or banner was matched by pro-Nationalist fans waving flags and cheering
for the “Chinese” team. The pro-state fans had an advantage, however, in the dozens of New York Chinatown thugs hired by the Guomindang to identify and rough up Taiwan independence activists at the games. The 1971 championship game was interrupted when a dozen of these toughs ran across the field to rip down a banner reading in English and Chinese, “Team of Taiwan, Go Taiwan.”

In 1972, when the Taibei Braves challenged for the world title, the Guomindang was better prepared, renting every single commercial aircraft for miles around to keep the Taiwan independence crowd from repeating their coup. Some seventy to eighty ROC military cadets training in the United States were also recruited to Williamsport to, as they shouted while beating Taiwanese male and female supporters with wooden clubs, “Kill the traitors!” One wonders what American fans at Williamsport thought of all this violence, but these concerns did not stop either side from carrying out their battles. In 1975, at the Senior Little League Championships in Gary, Indiana, Taiwanese activists floated a balloon bearing the message “Long Live Taiwan Independence.” Thanks to the generous and curious ABC cameramen on the scene, this sky-high subversion flashed across millions of Taiwan television screens for the first time in history. Thus, through the manipulation of satellite technology and the tweaking of the connection between sports and nationalism that the Guomindang itself had tried to disseminate in Taiwan, Little League baseball became one of the most effective and joyous ways of challenging Chinese Nationalist hegemony in Taiwan.

The many jumbled and precarious directions along which Taiwanese baseball developed in the first four decades of Guomindang rule did not resemble in the least the neat white lines of the baseball diamonds that were home to this movement. In the martial law days of mainland domination by the Guomindang party and state, baseball was one realm in which Taiwanese people could register their own contributions to Taiwan culture and society. In many ways baseball represented a table of negotiation, where Taiwanese baseball communities exchanged measures of integration for measures of independent expression, measures of “Chinese” identity for measures of pro-Japanese nostalgia, and measures of the autocratic Guomindang state for measures of an independent Taiwanese culture and society.

Planning for a Taiwanese professional baseball league began in late 1987, the year that martial law was lifted in Taiwan. The events of this year marked the end of four decades of naked authoritarian rule by the Guomindang and signaled the beginning of a new era in Taiwan. The nation now faced two challenges: defining a unique identity for the Chinese-but-not-really-Chinese island and ensuring Taiwan’s inclusion in a global world order. Both of these goals were realized with the creation of the Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL), which began play in 1990.

The CPBL consisted of four corporate-owned teams: the Weichuan Dragons, Brother Elephants, President Lions, and Mercuries Tigers. Each team’s uniforms clearly demonstrated the effort to present a product that was a pleasurable mix of the global and the Chinese; the teams’ names and parent companies were represented on the jerseys and caps in various mixtures of English and Chinese script. The four teams did not represent cities, as teams do in most professional leagues; instead, the teams played weekly round-robin series together, up and down the island’s west coast. Each baseball city had fan clubs supporting each of the CPBL’s four teams, who provided enthusiastic, flag-waving, drum-beating support but also could at times very easily turn violent. The sight of angry fans—Lions fans in the President Corporation’s hometown of Tainan were notorious for this—hurling bottles, cans, eggs, and garbage at opposing players, or even surrounding the opposing team’s bus in a mob, was not uncommon in the league’s early years.

Another important element of the CPBL was the presence of foreign players (usually called yangjiang, or “foreign talents”) culled from the rosters of American AA minor league teams. Sixteen American and Latin American players were selected to join the CPBL (with a league limit of four yangjiang per team). The presence of these players was meant to add an international flavor to the league and to provide an external stimulus for the improvement of the quality of CPBL play. In a 1993 conversation Jungo Bears pitcher Tony Metoyer described to me how the foreign players also served as “silent coaches” who could share their knowledge of American strategies and training methods with the Taiwanese players. Their many contributions allowed the Taiwanese game
to become similar in strategy to the more open or risky style of baseball played in the Americas, and less like the conservative game that suited Taiwan so well in its years of Little League dominance.

Steps were also taken to Sinicize the identities of the foreign players. Each player was given a “Chinese name,” which usually sounded something (if only vaguely) like the player’s original name and usually bestowed fine and admirable qualities on the foreigner. Freddy Tiburcio, the Elephants’ star Dominican outfielder, was called Dibo, or “imperial waves and billows.” Luis Iglesias, the Tigers’ home run champion from Panama, was called Yingxia, or “chivalrous eagle.” These players were photographed for magazine covers dressed in “traditional” Chinese scholars’ caps and robes, as Taiwan’s baseball public was taught that even in the realm of baseball the Chinese ability to assimilate outsiders was as powerful as ever.

Yet this “assimilation” could occur on the very crassest of terms, as many of the foreign players’ “Chinese” names were merely advertisements for products sold by their team’s parent corporation. The Mercuries Tigers inflicted names of noodle dishes from their chain restaurants onto pitchers Cesar Mejia and Rafael Valdez. The President Lions, whose parent company specialized in convenience stores and prepackaged foods, did the same with the names A–Q (instant noodles) and Baiwei (Budweiser) for pitchers Jose Cano and Ravelo Manzanillo. Later, the China Times Eagles resourcefully used names from their minor corporate sponsors, dubbing pitcher Steve Stoole “Meile” (Miller Beer), and calling the African Dominican outfielder Jose Gonzalez “Meilehei” (Miller Dark).9

The cpbl won several valuable publicity coups in its early years. In 1993 the Los Angeles Dodgers Major League squad visited, only to be beaten in two of three games by Taiwan’s cpbl teams. The presence in Taiwan’s ballparks of these representatives of the great American baseball traditions only boosted the status of the cpbl in the eyes of Taiwanese and foreign baseball communities.

Besides this conscious effort to connect Taiwanese baseball and culture to international baseball and culture, the cpbl’s local composition was also emphasized in marketing the league. The most direct connection was the presence of former Little League heroes who had won
such great honors for Taiwan in the 1970s. During their prime years in the 1980s, before the CPBL was founded, these heroes could only play in Japanese or Taiwanese semipro leagues. The CPBL was extremely fortunate to have begun play while this celebrated group could still play well; after a few years it was obvious that the careers of some of these ex–child stars were heading south. But their presence in the CPBL’s first years was crucial in making the league a viable enterprise.

Other accoutrements of “traditional Chinese culture” helped cement the league’s special Chinese characteristics as well. Fan favorites like Dragons pitcher Huang Pingyang and Lions captain Zeng Zhizhen (known as “The Ninja Catcher”) were often featured in magazines that recounted their pursuits of self-consciously Chinese or Taiwanese customs such as drinking fine tea, taking in traditional Taiwanese puppet theater, or collecting teapots or Buddhist paintings. Popular television variety shows even featured noted numerologists and geomancers using these “traditional” Chinese sciences to predict the results of upcoming baseball seasons. Thus, the roots of the CPBL’s early success lay in this important effort to combine the local and the global.

Minor League Foreigners and Tensions in “Chinese” Baseball

The CPBL reached its peak popularity, measured by crowd attendance, in its third through fifth seasons (1992–94). In 1993 two new teams joined the league—the Jungo Bears and the China Times Eagles—each loaded with seven young, popular members of Taiwan’s 1992 silver medal Olympic baseball team. That same season, the all-sports station TVIS paid NT$90 million (US$3.6 million) to broadcast CPBL games over the next three seasons—hardly American network money but a great improvement over the NT$3,000 (US$120) per-game fee paid previously by Taiwan’s major broadcast stations.

But somehow, despite all these signs of vigorous growth, the league’s popularity began to wane seriously by 1995, as the game began to lose the local Taiwan flavor it had worked so hard to cultivate. The CPBL mishandled the important balance between the local and the international that was so crucial to sustaining public interest in the league; owners developed a dependence on international networks that made the league simply less appealing.
Perhaps the most visible form of this dependence was the CPBL’s reliance on the foreign ballplayers invited to Taiwan to supplement the native rosters. Although most of these foreign players were AA-level minor leaguers who would never reach the American Major Leagues, several of them were able to excel in Taiwan. It became apparent in the league’s first year that a team’s success could depend heavily on the performance of its foreign “supplements.” Teams began putting more emphasis on the foreign element of their rosters, seeing it as the quickest path to improvement—it was certainly easier to wave money at a foreigner with proven skills than to dedicate several years to developing a Taiwanese player from scratch. The situation worsened in 1994 when the board of CPBL owners raised the foreign player maximum to seven per team. In 1995 this ceiling was again raised to ten foreigners per team, and in March 1997 the league owners voted to eliminate all limits whatsoever on roster composition.

Public interest in the league fell consistently as the CPBL became less and less “Chinese” or Taiwanese, and more and more reliant on American and Dominican players. By 1995, 44 percent of the players on CPBL rosters came from outside Taiwan. Many of these yangjiang made the situation even worse. Some admitted far too candidly to being baseball mercenaries in Taiwan solely for the relatively high salaries they could demand there. Others alienated local society with their promiscuous and even sometimes brutish behavior; in 1997 Foreign Pro Baseball Players’ Sex Scandals was published on the topic.

In 1998, commenting on the dominance of foreign pitchers in the CPBL, a Liberty Times (Taipei) columnist summoned up ugly images from modern Chinese history in calling the league’s pitching mound a “foreign concession” (waiguo zujie). Indeed, the predominance of foreign pitchers that season reached ridiculous heights. Of the one hundred CPBL pitchers who took the mound that year, only twenty-two were Taiwanese. The 1998 CPBL champion Weichuan Dragons carried twelve foreign pitchers on its roster (combined record 56 wins, 48 losses, and 1 tie), but only two Taiwanese pitchers (combined record 0-0-0).

In an editorial written in March 1997, a Taiwan sportswriter addressed the problem of the dominance of foreign players in Taiwan baseball differently. He credited the yangjiang with aiding the development of pro
baseball in Taiwan. However, he reminded fans that the use of these foreigners truly came down to one question: Would these “AAA-level [minor league] foreigners” ever be able to help Taiwan win an Olympic medal in baseball? In terms of national loyalty or the crucial international baseball stage, these foreign players could never truly contribute anything to Taiwan’s future.

Fans’ own wishes for a more Taiwan-centric CPBL were seen in the votes cast for the annual All-Star Game. In 1997, a season marked by foreign dominance more than any other, fans did not select a single foreigner to the All-Star teams. They preferred marginal (at best) players like Whales outfielder He Xianfan (batting average .218) and pitcher Huang Qingjing (1 win and 9 losses, 5.65 ERA) over the dozens of foreign players who were more deserving by any statistical standard. The presence of the foreign players and managers achieved one of the original goals of the yangjiang strategy: the quality of CPBL play improved greatly over the league’s first few years. However, it is telling that as the CPBL improved in technical terms, it simultaneously became a subject of such little interest to Taiwanese baseball fans.

**The Taiwan Major League**

In December 1995 a new chapter in the story of Taiwan baseball began. A group of investors, led by Qiu Fusheng and Chen Shengtian of the Era Communications and Sampo Electronics dynasties, respectively, announced the formation of the Taiwan Major League (TML), which would begin play in 1997. The TML was designed to trump the CPBL, not with better quality baseball but with a media-savvy and authentically “Taiwanese” approach that made the old league’s “Chinese” identity look like cheap, outdated gimmicks. This explicitly politicized strategy fit perfectly within the crucial dialectic between globalization and local Taiwanese identity: Pride in Taiwan’s unique culture and in the contributions Taiwan can make justifies a place for Taiwan in the international community. Likewise, the pursuit of international (often specifically American or Japanese) trends and symbols can also be understood as solidifying a status for a Taiwan independent of the PRC and its threats of reunification. Mastering this dialectic between the uniquely Taiwanese and the international or universal is necessary for
the success of any cultural, social, commercial, or political enterprise in contemporary Taiwan. The tml met these requirements.

Unlike the cpbl, the tml did not allow its productive connections with Japanese and American baseball to overshadow the league’s explicitly “Taiwanese” character. Where the cpbl clung to dry stereotypes of “traditional China,” the tml’s identity was squarely based in Taiwan’s unique culture and history. The name of the Naluwan Corporation, which ran the tml, and the names of the four teams—Agan (robots), Fala (thunder gods), Gida (suns), and Luka (braves)—were taken from languages of Taiwan’s several aborigine tribes. Team uniforms were designed to reflect “the special characteristics of the aborigine peoples,” but also only after “consideration of the colors and design of professional baseball uniforms of other nations.”

Another important choice made by the tml was to follow what it called a “territorial philosophy,” where each team has a home city or region and its own home field, unlike the cpbl, whose teams never enjoyed a true home team advantage. This “territorial” doctrine dictated that teams take these “home” connections seriously. Before the 1997 season, teams took part in New Year’s ceremonies in their home cities and took oaths before city officials to serve as loyal and morally upright representatives of these cities. These hometown loyalties took on more significance with the tragic earthquake that struck central Taiwan in September 1999. The Robots quickly dubbed themselves “the Disaster Area Team” and set up their own Robots van that delivered disinfectants, vitamins, and medicines to the residents of the quake’s epicenter.

Participation in the international sport of baseball, as well as impressive connections to powerful baseball networks all over the world, created a cosmopolitan image for the tml. Yet the early success of the tml came from this bold celebration of the local, the authentic, the Taiwanese. Even though the new league offered an inferior quality of baseball than the old cpbl, the tml consistently outdrew its rival at the gates. One random but telling example was a night in September 1998 when 14,385 Jiayi fans attended a tml Braves–Robots game, compared to crowds of 629 and 1,113 that showed up for cpbl games in Taibei and Gaoxiong, respectively.

The tml’s official theme song, “Naluwan—Chéng-keng ê Eng-hiông”
(Naluwan—True Heroes), was perhaps the finest example of the fascinating mixture of historical and cultural legacies that makes Taiwan society unique and dynamic, and so difficult to fit within most standard models of historical, economic, cultural, social, or political development. The TML anthem, supposedly based on rhythms and patterns of several types of Aboriginal tribal songs, consists of lyrics in Mandarin, Taiwanese, English, Japanese, and Aboriginal languages:

Naluwan—True Heroes
Take charge—the fervent spirit of the rainbow,
Our hearts are filled—with great fire shining bright,
Struggle on—with hopes that never die,
Start anew—a space for us alone.
Fight! Fight! Fight, fight! Speed just like the wind,
K! K! K! Power stronger than all,
Homu-ran batta—truly strong and brave,
Aaa . . . Naluwan, the true heroes!

Each singing, each playing of this league anthem became a neat and tidy re-creation of the last several centuries of Taiwan history and culture. To be sure, little room for critical analysis of, or retrospection on, this history was allowed in this rousing, commercialized theme song. But the tune was one more way in which the TML sought to portray itself as the true heirs, and “the true heroes,” of the proud, complicated history of Taiwan.

“You’ve Got the F——ing Trouble”:
The Fall of Taiwanese Pro Baseball, 1997–2001

In the winter of 1997 the future of Taiwan’s pro baseball enterprise looked bright. The CPBL was beginning the first year of a rich new television contract with the China Trust conglomerate worth NT$1.5 billion (US$60 million) over three years. The TML stirred up controversy by stealing some of the CPBL’s best players and promised to provide healthy competition for the old league.

Unfortunately, 1997 would bring only disgrace, both domestic and international, to the CPBL. In late January 1997, law enforcement un-
covered a gambling scandal that revolved around the fixing of CPBL games by ballplayers in return for huge payoffs—often double a player’s monthly salary. The nation was shocked by the front-page news that some of the game’s greatest and most popular stars had accepted payoffs of NT$300,000 to $500,000 (US$11,000–$18,000) per game that they threw for the local gangs handling the “gambling” on each team. The China Times Eagles threw games most spectacularly; it was revealed that the entire team was bought off regularly for a single team fee of NT$7.5 million (US$270,000) per game.¹²

This scandal, which was later found to be linked to gambling interests in Hong Kong and Macao as well as southern Taiwan, led to the near unraveling of the league as the public learned the sordid details of this enterprise. This was a tricky business; Lions stars Jiang Taiquan and Guo Jinxing lost some NT$200 million (US$7.3 million) of one gambling outfit’s money in a 1996 game by accidentally winning after assuring gamblers that the Lions would lose.¹³

No team or player was safe from these gangs and their members’ frustrations when their favorite teams won. Loyal Elephants gamblers furious at their team’s winning ways kidnapped five Elephant players, pistol-whipping one and shoving a gun down the throat of another. Seven Tigers players (including two Americans and two Puerto Ricans) were abducted at the Gaoxiong Stardust Hotel by gun-packing thugs who used similarly violent ways of “encouraging” the players to throw games. And one day, while picking up his daughter at school, Dragons manager Xu Shengming was stabbed in the lower back by a representative of yet another gambling outfit.

Fewer and fewer fans decided to pay much attention to a league whose games they feared were still being decided by sleazy mob kings. Attendance fell by 55 percent in 1997, a change also due to the easier availability of American and Japanese baseball games via Taiwan’s bounding cable TV market. By the 1999 season, fan attendance at most games was below 1,000. One day in October 1999, the two scheduled CPBL games, both crucial to the late-season pennant race, drew just 176 and 116 fans, respectively. During the winter after the 1999 season, the league lost two more teams, as the Mercuries Tigers and three-time de-
fending champion Weichuan Dragons both cited financial pressures in folding their baseball operations.

The fall of the CPBL came at the exact moment when American and Japanese Major League teams were beginning to aggressively scout young Taiwanese baseball talent. In 1999-2000 seven young players who would have starred in Taiwan signed lucrative contracts with American and Japanese teams. The Los Angeles Dodgers, well connected in Taiwan, struck first by signing young outfielder Chen Chin-Feng. Chen was named league MVP in his first U.S. minor league season (California League, Class A) in 1999, and made his Major League debut in September 2002. The Colorado Rockies were next, bagging eighteen-year-old Tsao Chin-hui, toast of the 1999 World Junior Championships, with a $2.2 million contract in 2000. Tsao, who had been scouted by Major League teams since junior high school, was called the “the Hope Diamond of the Rockies’ minor league system” and started eight games for the big league club in 2003. The New York Yankees, Seattle Mariners, Seibu Lions, and Chunichi Dragons also invested heavily in young Taiwanese players whose talent the Taiwanese professional game now must live without.

A final humiliation came in March 2001, on the opening night of the TML’s fifth season of play. The TML, although not tainted directly by the CPBL’s gambling problems, had also seen the popularity of its inferior quality of baseball wane since 1997. By 2001 the two rival leagues, both plagued by several consecutive money-losing seasons, were seriously considering a merger and a further downsizing of the baseball enterprise. The TML shortened the team schedules to just 60 games each (from 84) in 2001 and desperately tried to attract fans with a new marketing gimmick, naming four pop stars as official “spokespeople” for each of the league’s teams. Rapper Zhang Zhenyu, spokesman of the Gaoxiong Thunder Gods, was scheduled to kick off the festivities at Chengqing Lake Stadium, along with ROC legislative Yuan speaker Wang Jinping (also TML chairman) and Ronald McDonald. The game itself was to be a milestone in TML history, marking the debut of Taipei Suns manager Li Juming, the former Little League star idolized as Taiwan’s “Mr. Baseball.” The season got off to an unbecoming start, however, when Zhang enthusiastically performed his song “Trouble,” repeatedly
screaming in English before the sellout crowd and a national TV audience, “You’ve got the f——ing trouble! You’ve got the f——ing trouble!” Zhang’s league handlers, not to mention Ronald McDonald, were surely humiliated by this display of bad judgment, but his words were also a very accurate diagnosis of the state of Taiwanese pro baseball at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

On December 31, 2000, Taiwan president Chen Shui-bian made his first New Year’s address to the nation, remarks meant to sum up his first seven months in office and to “bridge the new century.” Chen had much to discuss, from the political revolution completed by his own victory and his once-illegal party’s climb to power, to entry into the World Trade Organization and Taiwan’s increasingly tense relations with China. The president summed up his remarks with comments on the unique “Taiwan spirit” forged during the twentieth century, and closed his address with an interesting symbol of the Taiwan experience:

I recently had the opportunity to read some of Taiwan’s historical records and was deeply inspired by one picture in particular: a portrait of the Maple Leaf Little League baseball team. In this black-and-white photograph, there was a barefoot aboriginal boy at bat. His face showed full concentration, as he focused all of his energy on his responsibility. Meanwhile, his teammates stood by on the sidelines anxiously watching and giving encouragement. Such a beautiful moment perfectly captures 20th century Taiwan and is a memory that I will never forget.

My dear fellow countrymen, history has passed the bat to us, and it is now our turn to stand at the plate. The 21st century will undoubtedly throw us several good pitches, as well as one or two dusters (huaiqiu). Regardless of what is thrown to us, however, we must stand firm and concentrate all of our strength and willpower for our best swing.14

It is no accident that Chen chose this image to encapsulate Taiwan’s history and identity. (Although he may have understated the case by calling a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan a mere “duster.”)

The history of Taiwanese baseball is an appropriate and crucial window for understanding the complicated histories and cultures of modern Taiwan. Starting with the game’s Japanese origins, and then the
high-profile successes of Taiwanese Little League baseball from the 1960s to the 1980s, baseball was an important avenue by which Taiwanese people navigated the historical relationships with the Japanese, the Chinese Nationalists, and their American allies. Now, in the twenty-first century, as the search for a uniquely Taiwanese identity is given official sanction, baseball is a crucial element of this identity.

Despite the depths to which the professional game’s popularity has sunk, recent events still demonstrate the centrality of baseball in Taiwan. Taiwan successfully hosted the 2001 International Baseball Federation amateur championships, a development that speaks to the weight that Taiwan carries in the world baseball community despite efforts by the PRC to shut down this type of international Taiwan presence.

More than a century ago Mark Twain wrote that baseball was the
perfect expression of American society, declaring that the game had become “the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century!”

The same can be said for Taiwan. Baseball has been repositioned at the center of a new Taiwanese nationalism and project of self-definition. In early 2003 President Chen won great face when he was able to achieve a long-awaited merger between Taiwan’s two pro leagues, ending the bickering that had robbed baseball of its national unifying power.

The renewed national attachment to baseball is illustrated perfectly by the NT$500 bill issued in December 2000. As the sagely visage of the iron-fisted Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek is removed from Taiwan’s currency for the new millennium, what better indigenous symbol to replace him than an image of the young Little Leaguers who won his regime so much fame in the 1970s? Now, instead of facing the gaze of the Chinese military leader forced on Taiwanese youth for four decades as “Savior of the People,” Taiwan consumers handing over NT$500 are inspired by the smiles on the faces of the Puyuma aborigine boys from Taidong County whose victory celebration is portrayed on the bill. These are the healthy and “authentic” faces that Taiwanese people today want as representatives of their island nation—and as they have represented for nearly a century, through their national sport of baseball.

Notes

This article has been adapted from an earlier piece, “Baseball, History, the Local and the Global in Taiwan.”

1. The Kōshien tournament, founded in 1915, began inviting Taiwan representatives in 1923. From 1923 to 1930 all the Taiwan teams that qualified for Kōshien were Japanese teams.


3. Unfortunately, the jubilation over these victories was soon dampened by an unfortunate revelation. The Maple Leaf roster of eleven players included nine ineligible boys who were playing under false names. Months after these victories, the Maple Leaf Elementary School principal, coach, and head administrator were all sentenced to a year’s imprisonment by the Taidong County Local Court for these gross violations.


6. Star Yu Hongkai, from Taidong, had played illegally as a ringer for the 1968 Maple Leaf team and was recruited from across the island for the 1969 Golden Dragons. Guo Yuanzhi, who would go on to star for the Chunichi Dragons in Japan, was also recruited from Taidong.


8. Of the nineteen foreigners who played during the CPBL’s first season, only two had Major League experience: Tigers infielder Jose Moreno (1980 New York Mets, 1981 San Diego Padres, 1982 California Angels) and Elephants pitcher Jose Roman (1984–86 Cleveland Indians).

9. In 1997 the Sinon Bulls, owned by the huge Sinon Agrochemical Corporation, cleverly named several of its foreign players after the conglomerate’s best-selling pesticides.

10. In the CPBL’s major statistical categories for 1997, there were the following numbers of foreign players in the top 10: batting average, 8; home runs, 8; runs batted in, 7; and victories, 7.

11. “Qiuyuan quan chong mote’er—zhanpao shanliang xianshen” (Ballplayers moonlighting as models—battle gear unveiled in its glory), Naluwan zhou-bao 7 (February 1, 1997): 3.

12. Dubbed the “Black Eagles” (Heiying), the team was suspended from the league in late 1997 and formally disbanded in 1998.

13. After being banned from Taiwan professional baseball, Jiang got a second chance five years later in mainland China as coach of the Tianjin Lions of the new China Baseball League, and manager of the PRC national team. The Tianjin team, which evidently has a poor vetting process, also hired fallen Taiwan stars Guo Jiancheng and Zheng Baisheng, also banned in 1997 for throwing CPBL games, as coaches.


**Bibliography**


